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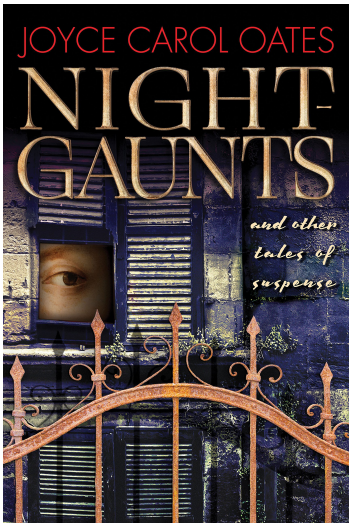
Throughout her writing career, Joyce Carol Oates's fiction has frequently and self-consciously tapped into the gothic and horror genres. She's previously described how this form of writing seems to be linked to a quintessential kind of American experience born out of the country's largely puritan roots. Examples of her fiction in this genre can be seen in many of Oates's story collections and her 2013 novel *The Accursed* is probably the most sustained instance of this curious blend of horror, death, romance, and a pleasing sort of terror. There are two



established masters Oates frequently references when discussing this form. In her 1996 *New York Review of Books* article titled "The King of Weird," Oates observes that for "Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft the gothic tale would seem to be a form of psychic autobiography." She goes on to observe how H.P. Lovecraft's fiction appears to have been motivated by a particular kind of sensitivity and a childhood overshadowed by his father's severe mental illness, prejudices, and early death from syphilis. From a young age Lovecraft was plagued by nightmares that were populated by a monstrous race of entities he labeled "night-gaunts" who were faceless beings that snatched him up and terrorized him. Lovecraft wrote a poem about these creatures which Oates includes in the epigraph of her story collection which is also called *Night-Gaunts*.

This entire collection is inflected with the twisted imagination and preoccupations of Lovecraft, but rather than depicting fantastical worlds, they are stories set in starkly realistic and (mostly) contemporary settings. In fact, the titular story which ends the book is a tribute to and a fictional re-imagining of Lovecraft's life. This story vividly evokes the difficult experiences which shaped him and influenced his creative imagination, from his reading about the hellish landscape of Dante's Inferno to browsing the terrifying drawings of Félicien Rops. Interestingly, Oates describes how the only way he could keep the horrors which plagued him at bay was to render the haunting images and wild scenarios of his nightmares into fictional forms. It's a striking depiction of the artistic process, and as his craft develops, "he had no need to commemorate the *night-*

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gaunts that haunted him, but could create his own." Oates's story itself is also a suspenseful tale of horror where Lovecraft is entrapped in a circular kind of nightmare which makes him a simultaneous witness and victim of his past plagued by feelings of grief, loneliness and fear.

Oates has previously rendered the lives of famous authors in her short fiction, most notably in her collection *Wild Nights!* These tantalizing tales function both as a fictional homage to some of Oates's primary influences as well as a way of reckoning with the problematic aspects of these authors' ideas and beliefs. The story "Night-Gaunts" itself makes candid references to Lovecraft's prejudice against Jews and people of color and grapples with the seeming contradiction of how (as Oates describes in the "The King of Weird") "Lovecraft was unfailingly kind, patient, generous, unassuming, and gentlemanly in his personal relations; yet, in keeping with his Tory sensibility, an anti-Semite (despite his deep affection for Sonia Greene and other Jewish friends), racist, and all-purpose Aryan bigot." A kind of disguised or shrouded racism is described in a few of the stories in this collection including a neglected wife who takes solace in connecting to white supremacists online and a young Asian scientist cognizant of the stereotypes projected onto him from his colleagues and romantic partner/test subject.

In Lovecraft's poem he states how his night-gaunts fail to "wear a face where faces should be found," and in Oates's stories there are

fascinating examples of individuals who are described as faceless. A central character in a story will turn someone they encounter into a faceless "other" who then becomes their antagonist. The fact that the protagonists literally don't recognize the facial features of these characters dangerously denies them their humanity. The opening story "The Woman in the Window" imagines the scenario of Edward Hopper's painting "Eleven A.M." (Incidentally, this painting is the cover image on the hardback edition of Oates's previous story collection *Beautiful Days*.) In this painting, the naked woman's face is obscured by her hair falling in front of it. Oates's story describes how she is an aging secretary who has become a nuisance and terror to the married boss who keeps her as a lover. In the story "The Long-Legged Girl" a wife suspects that a young female student is having an affair with her husband, and she describes how the girl's "long straight silver-blond hair fell about her face shimmering like a falls." Despite the girl describing her difficulties and innocent reverence for her husband, the wife refuses to see her as anything other than a seductress. In the story "Walking Wounded" a cancer-survivor who returns to his home town continuously encounters/stalks a woman with "silvery hair," and at one point he observes how "Her long, tangled hair falls forward, hiding her face, which seems to him an aggrieved face, though he cannot see it clearly." The climax of the story powerfully depicts a violent clash where the protagonist's fantasy about this woman collapses. All of these stories meaningfully portray the way Lovecraft's unconscious technique of making faceless demons out of people we fear leads to disconnection and egregious violence.

A wonderful nail-biting suspense is created in these stories when the line between reality and nightmare blurs. This sometimes occurs when there is an ambiguity about whether the protagonist is a perpetrator or victim. In "Walking Wounded" the main character is laboriously editing a lengthy nonfiction book and keeps finding descriptions of violence against women inserted in the text. Whether it is the book's author or the protagonist who wrote them is unclear. In "Sign of the Beast" a boy is made to feel incredibly self-conscious in the presence of his new Sunday school teacher who teases and may even molest him. Much later, when the teacher is found dead, the boy feels certain he must have committed the crime though law enforcement insists he played no part. These uncertainties about guilt form a suspenseful read, but also poignantly portray the psychological reality of the characters whose sense of logic breaks down.

In the most ambitious and lengthy story in this collection, "The Experimental Subject," a naive young nursing student is unknowingly enlisted in an outrageous biological experiment. A group of scientists entrap her and manipulate her for the purposes of their study. This story playfully pits the ambitions of man against biological advancement and ideas about evolution. It also meaningfully portrays the plights of two frequently scorned segments of the population: the working class and racial minorities. The breadth and ambition of this novella feels almost cinematic in scope. It's a fine example of how Oates's fiction can travel to the

wildest corners of our imaginations and artfully dramatize the simmering preoccupations of America. These stories skillfully invoke the tortured imagination of Lovecraft and form utterly compelling modern tales of suspense.

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